

## A Troublesome Property

Slaves apparently thought of the South's peculiar institution chiefly as a system of labor extortion. Of course they felt its impact in other ways—in their social status, their legal status, and their private lives—but they felt it most acutely in their lack of control over their own time and labor. If discontented with bondage, they could be expected to direct their protests principally against the master's claim to their work. Whether the majority were satisfied with their lot, whether they willingly obeyed the master's commands, has long been a controversial question.

It may be a little presumptuous of one who has never been a slave to pretend to know how slaves felt, yet defenders of slavery did not hesitate to assert that most of them were quite content with servitude. Bondsmen generally were cheerful and acquiescent—so the argument went—because they were treated with kindness and relieved of all responsibilities; having known no other condition, they unthinkingly accepted bondage as their natural status. "They find themselves first existing in this state," observed a Northerner who had resided in Mississippi, "and pass through life without questioning the justice of their allotment, which, if they think at all, they suppose a natural one."<sup>1</sup> Presumably they acquiesced, too, because of innate racial traits, because of the "genius of African temperament," the Negro being "instinctively . . . contented" and "quick to respond to the stimulus of joy, quick to forget his grief." Except in rare instances when he was cruelly treated, his "peaceful frame of mind was not greatly disturbed by the mere condition of slavery."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> [Ingraham], *South-West*, II, p. 201.

<sup>2</sup> Francis P. Gaines, *The Southern Plantation: A Study in the Development and the Accuracy of a Tradition* (New York, 1924), p. 244.

Though sometimes asserted with such assurance, it was never proved that the great majority of bondsmen had no concept of freedom and were therefore contented. It was always based upon inference. Most masters believed they understood their slaves, and most slaves apparently made no attempt to discourage this belief. Instead, they said the things they thought their masters wanted to hear, and they conformed with the rituals that signified their subservience. Rare, no doubt, was the master who never heard any of his humble, smiling bondsmen affirm their loyalty and contentment. When visitors in the South asked a slave whether he wished to be free, he usually replied: "No, massa, me no want to be free, have good massa, take care of me when I sick, never 'buse nigger, no, me no want to be free."<sup>3</sup>

This was dubious evidence, as some slaveholders knew and others learned. (They would have acknowledged the validity of an affirmation later to be made by a post-bellum South Carolinian: "the white man does not know the Negro so well as he thinks he does.")<sup>4</sup> A Virginia master believed that slaves had their faculties "sharpened by constant exercise" and that their perceptions were "extremely fine and acute." An overseer decided that a man who "put his confidence in a Negro . . . was simply a Damned Fool." A Georgia planter concluded: "So deceitful is the Negro that as far as my own experience extends I could never in a single instance decipher his character. . . . We planters could never get at the truth."<sup>5</sup> When advertising for runaways, masters repeatedly confirmed these opinions by describing them as being "very artful," as acting and conversing in a way "calculated to deceive almost any one," and (most frequently) as possessing a "pretty glib and plausible tongue." Yet proslavery writers swallowed whole the assurances of contentment which these glib-tongued "scoundrels" gave them.

Since there are few reliable records of what went on in the minds of slaves, one can only infer their thoughts and feelings from their behavior, that of their masters, and the logic of their situation. That they had no understanding of freedom, and therefore accepted bondage as their natural condition, is hard to believe. They had only to observe their masters and the other free men about them to obtain a very distinct idea of the meaning and advantages of freedom. All knew that some Negroes had been emancipated; they knew that freedom was a possible condition for any of them. They "continually have before their eyes, persons of the same color, many of whom they have known in slavery . . . freed from the control of masters, working where they please, going whither they please, and expending their money how they please." So declared a group of Charleston whites who

<sup>3</sup> Ethan A. Andrews, *Slavery and the Domestic Slave Trade in the United States* (Boston, 1836), pp. 97-99.

<sup>4</sup> Mason Crum, *Gullah: Negro Life in the Carolina Sea Islands* (Durham, 1940), p. 80.

<sup>5</sup> Abdy, *Journal*, II, pp. 216-17; Mangault Ms. Plantation Records, summary of plantation events, May 1863-May 1864; entry for March 22, 1867.

petitioned the legislature to expel all free persons of color from South Carolina.<sup>9</sup>

Untutored slaves seldom speculated about freedom as an abstraction. They naturally focused their interest upon such immediate and practical benefits as escaping severe discipline and getting increased compensation for less labor. An ex-slave explained simply what freedom meant to her: "I am now my own mistress, and need not work when I am sick. I can do my own thinkings, without having any to think for me,—to tell me when to come, what to do, and to sell me when they get ready."<sup>7</sup> Though she may never have heard of the doctrine of natural rights, her concept of freedom surely embraced more than its incidental aspects.

If slaves had some understanding of the pragmatic benefits of freedom, no doubt most of them desired to enjoy these benefits. Some, perhaps the majority, had no more than a vague, unarticulated yearning for escape from burdens and restraints. They submitted, but submission did not necessarily mean enjoyment or even contentment. And some slaves felt more than a vague longing, felt a sharp pang and saw a clear objective. They struggled toward it against imposing obstacles, expressing their discontent through positive action.

Were these, the actively discontented, to be found only among slaves exposed to great physical cruelty? Apparently not. Slaves of gentle masters might seek freedom as eagerly as those of cruel ones. Frederick Douglass, the most famous refugee from slavery, testified: "Beat and cuff your slave, keep him hungry and spiritless, and he will follow the chain of his master like a dog; but feed and clothe him well,—work him moderately—surround him with physical comfort,—and dreams of freedom intrude. Give him a bad master, and he aspires to a good master; give him a good master, and he wishes to become his own master."<sup>8</sup> Here was a problem confronting conscientious slaveholders. One confessed that slaveownership subjected "the man of care and feeling to more dilemmas than perhaps any other vocation he could follow.... To moralize and induce the slave to assimilate with the master and his interest, has been and is the great desideratum aimed at; but I am sorry to say I have long since desponded in the completion of this task."<sup>9</sup> Another slaveholder who vaguely affirmed that his bondsmen were "as contented as their nature will permit" was in reality agreeing with what a white man once bluntly stated before the Louisiana Supreme Court: The desire for freedom "exists in the bosom of every slave—whether the recent captive, or him to whom bondage has become a habit."<sup>10</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Phillips (ed.), *Plantation and Frontier*, II, pp. 108–11.

<sup>7</sup> Drew, *The Refugee*, p. 177.

<sup>8</sup> Douglass, *My Bondage*, pp. 263–64.

<sup>9</sup> *Southern Agriculturist*, III (1830), p. 238.

<sup>10</sup> Ebenezer Pettigrew to Mrs. Mary Shepard, September 22, 1847, Pettigrew Family Papers; Catterall (ed.), *Judicial Cases*, III, p. 568.

Slaves showed great eagerness to get some—if they could not get all—of the advantages of freedom. They liked to hire their own time; or to work in tobacco factories, or for the Tredegar Iron Company, because they were then under less restraint than in the fields, and they had greater opportunities to earn money for themselves. They seized the chance to make their condition approximate that of freedmen.

But they were not satisfied with a mere loosening of the bonds. Former slaves affirmed that one had to "know the heart of the poor slave—learn his secret thoughts—thoughts he dare not utter in the hearing of the white man," to understand this. "A man who has been in slavery knows, and no one else can know, the yearnings to be free, and the fear of making the attempt." While he was still in bondage Douglass wondered how white people knew that God had made black people to be slaves. "Did they go up in the sky and learn it? or, did He come down and tell them so?"<sup>11</sup> A slave on a Louisiana sugar plantation assured Olmsted that slaves did desire freedom, that they talked about it among themselves, and that they speculated about what they would do if they were emancipated. When a traveler in Georgia told a slave he understood his people did not wish to be free, "His only answer was a short, contemptuous laugh."<sup>12</sup>

If slaves yielded to authority most of the time, they did so because they usually saw no other practical choice. Yet few went through life without expressing discontent somehow, some time. Even the most passive slaves, usually before they reached middle age, flared up in protests now and then. The majority, as they grew older, lost hope and spirit. Some, however, never quite gave in, never stopped fighting back in one way or another. The "bad character" of this "insolent," "sassy," and "unruly" sort made them a liability to those who owned them, for a slave's value was measured by his disposition as much as by his strength and skills. Such rebels seldom won legal freedom, yet they never quite admitted they were slaves.

Slave resistance, whether bold and persistent or mild and sporadic, created for all slaveholders a serious problem of discipline. As authors or as readers they saw the problem discussed in numberless essays with such titles as "The Management of Negroes," essays which filled the pages of southern agricultural periodicals. Many masters had reason to agree with the owner of a hundred slaves who complained that he possessed "just 100 troubles," or with the North Carolina planter who said that slaves were "a troublesome property."<sup>13</sup>

The record of slave resistance forms a chapter in the story of the end-

<sup>11</sup> Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave*, pp. 206–207; Drew, *The Refugee*, pp. 43, 115; Douglass, *My Bondage*, pp. 89–91.

<sup>12</sup> Olmsted, *Seaboard*, pp. 679–80; James Stirling, *Letters from the Slave States* (London, 1857), p. 201.

<sup>13</sup> Gustavus A. Henry to his wife, November 25, 1849, Henry Papers; William S. Pettigrew to James C. Johnston, January 6, 1847 (copy), Pettigrew Family Papers.

less struggle to give dignity to human life. Though the history of southern bondage reveals that men can be enslaved under certain conditions, it also demonstrates that their love of freedom is hard to crush. The subtle expressions of this spirit, no less than the daring thrusts for liberty, comprise one of the richest gifts the slaves have left posterity. In making themselves "troublesome property," they provide reassuring evidence that slaves seldom wear their shackles lightly.

The record of the minority who waged ceaseless and open warfare against their bondage makes an inspiring chapter, also, in the history of Americans of African descent. True, these rebels were exceptional men, but the historian of any group properly devotes much attention to those members who did extraordinary things, men in whose lives the problems of their age found focus, men who voiced the feelings and aspirations of the more timid and less articulate masses. As the American Revolution produced folk heroes, so also did southern slavery—heroes who, in both cases, gave much for the cause of human freedom. . . .

The masses of slaves, for whom freedom could have been little more than an idle dream, found countless ways to exasperate their masters—and thus saw to it that bondage as a labor system had its limitations as well as its advantages. Many slaves were doubtless pulled by conflicting impulses; a desire for the personal satisfaction gained from doing a piece of work well, as against a desire to resist or outwit the master by doing it badly or not at all. Which impulse dominated a given slave at a given time depended upon many things, but the latter one was bound to control him at least part of the time. Whether the master was humane or cruel, whether he owned a small farm or a large plantation, did not seem to be crucial considerations, for almost all slaveholders had trouble in managing this kind of labor.

Not that every malingering or intractable bondswoman was pursuing a course calculated to lead toward freedom for his people, or at least for himself. He was not always even making a conscious protest against bondage. Some of his "misdeeds" were merely unconscious reflections of the character that slavery had given him—evidence, as one planter explained, that slavery tended to render him "callous to the ideas of honor and even honesty" (as the master class understood those terms). "Come day, go day, God send Sunday," eloquently expressed the indifference of the "heedless, thoughtless," slave.<sup>14</sup>

But the element of conscious resistance was often present too; whether or not it was the predominant one the master usually had no way of knowing. In any case, he was likely to be distressed by his inability to persuade his slaves to "assimilate" their interest with his. "We all know," complained one slaveholder, that the slave's feeling of obligation to his master "is of so

flimsy a character that none of us rely upon it."<sup>15</sup>

Slaveholders disagreed as to whether "smart" Negroes or "stupid" ones caused them the greater trouble. A Mississippian told Olmsted that the "smart" ones were "rascally" and constantly "getting into scrapes," and a Louisianian confessed that his slave Lucy was "the greatest rascal" and the "smartest negro of her age" he had ever known.<sup>16</sup> On the other hand, many masters were annoyed by the seeming stupidity of some of their slaves, by their unwillingness to "think for themselves." A Negro recently imported from Africa was said to be especially prone to this kind of stubborn obtuseness: "Let a hundred men shew him how to hoe, or drive a wheelbarrow, he'll still take the one by the Bottom and the other by the Wheel."<sup>17</sup>

According to a former slave, the bondsmen had good reason for encouraging their master to underrate their intelligence. Ignorance was "a high virtue in a human chattel," he suggested, and since it was the master's purpose to keep his bondsmen in this state, they were shrewd enough to make him think he succeeded.<sup>18</sup> A Virginia planter concluded from his own long experience that many slaveholders were victimized by the "sagacity" of Negroes whom they mistakenly thought they understood so well. He was convinced that the slaves, "under the cloak of great stupidity," made "duplicates" of their masters: "The most general defect in the character of the negro, is hypocrisy; and this hypocrisy frequently makes him pretend to more ignorance than he possesses; and if his master treats him as a fool, he will be sure to act the fool's part. This is a very convenient trait, as it frequently serves as an apology for awkwardness and neglect of duty."<sup>19</sup>

Slaveowners generally took it as a matter of course that a laborer would shirk when he could and perform no more work than he had to. They knew that, in most cases, the only way to keep him "in the straight path of duty" was to watch him "with an eye that never slumbers."<sup>20</sup> They frequently used such terms as "slow," "lazy," "wants pushing," "an eye servant," and "a trifling negro" when they made private appraisals of their slaves. "Hands won't work unless I am in sight," a small Virginia planter once wrote angrily in his diary. "I left the field at 12 [with] all going on well, but very little done after [that]."<sup>21</sup> Olmsted, watching an overseer riding among the slaves on a South Carolina plantation, observed that he was "constantly directing and encouraging them, but . . . as often as he visited one end of the line of operations, the hands at the other end would discontinue their labor, until

<sup>14</sup> James W. Bell to William S. Pettigrew, May 3, 1853, Pettigrew Family Papers.

<sup>15</sup> Olmsted, *Back Country*, pp. 154-55; Edwin A. Davis (ed.), *Plantation Life in the Florida Parishes of Louisiana, 1836-1846*. As Reflected in the Diary of Bennett H. Barrow (New York, 1943), p. 164.

<sup>16</sup> E. B. R. to James B. Bailey, March 24, 1856, James B. Bailey Papers; Gray, *History of Agriculture*, I, p. 519.

<sup>17</sup> Douglass, *My Bondage*, p. 81.

<sup>18</sup> *Farmers' Register*, V (1837), p. 32.

<sup>19</sup> William S. Pettigrew to James C. Johnston, October 3, 1850, Pettigrew Family Papers.

<sup>20</sup> William C. Adams Ms. Diary, entries for July 18, 20, 1857.

<sup>21</sup> Johnson, *Ante-Bellum North Carolina*, p. 496; W. P. Harrison, *The Gospel Among the Slaves* (Nashville, 1893), p. 103.

he turned to ride towards them again." Other visitors in the South also noticed "the futile cessation from toil that invariably took place, as the overseer's eye was turned from them."<sup>22</sup>

Slaves sought to limit the quantity of their services in many different ways. At cotton picking time they carried cotton from the gin house to the field in the morning to be weighed with the day's picking at night. They concealed dirt or rocks in their cotton baskets to escape punishment for loafing. They fixed their own work quotas, and masters had to adopt stern measures to persuade them that they had been unduly presumptuous. Where the task system was used, they stubbornly resisted any attempt to increase the size of the daily tasks fixed by custom.<sup>23</sup> Athletic and muscular slaves, as Frederick Douglass recalled, were inclined to be proud of their capacity for labor, and the master often sought to promote rivalry among them; but they knew that this "was not likely to pay," for "if, by extraordinary exertion, a large quantity of work was done in one day, the fact becoming known to the master, might lead him to require the same amount every day." Some refused to become skilled craftsmen, for, as one of them explained, he would gain nothing by learning a craft.<sup>24</sup> Few seemed to feel any personal shame when dubbed "eye servants."

Slaves retaliated as best they could against those who treated them severely, and sometimes their reprisals were at least partly successful. Experience taught many slaveholders "that every attempt to force a slave beyond the limit that he fixes himself as a sufficient amount of labor to render his master, instead of extorting more work, only tends to make him unprofitable, unmanageable, a vexation and a curse. If you protract his regular hours of labor, his movements become proportionally slower." The use of force might cause him to work still more slowly until he fell "into a state of impassivity" in which he became "insensible and indifferent to punishment, or even to life."<sup>25</sup> After a slave was punished in the Richmond tobacco factories, the other hands "gave neither song nor careless shout for days, while the bosses fretted at slackened production."<sup>26</sup>

Besides slowing down, many slaves bedeviled the master by doing careless work and by damaging property. They did much of this out of sheer irresponsibility, but they did at least part of it deliberately, as more than one master suspected. A Louisiana doctor, Samuel W. Cartwright, attributed their work habits to a disease, peculiar to Negroes, which he called *Dysaethesia Aethiopica* and which overseers "erroneously" called "rascality." An African who suffered from this exotic affliction was "apt to do much mis-

chief" which appeared "as if intentional." He destroyed or wasted everything he touched, abused the livestock, and injured the crops. When he was driven to his labor he performed his tasks "in a headlong, careless manner, treading down with his feet or cutting with his hoe the plants" he was supposed to cultivate, breaking his tools, and "spoil[ing] everything." This, wrote the doctor soberly, was entirely due to "the stupidity of mind and insensibility of the nerves induced by the disease."<sup>27</sup>

But slaveowners ignored this clinical analysis and persisted in diagnosing the disease as nothing but "rascality." To overcome it, they had to supervise the work closely. They searched for methods to prevent slaves from abusing horses and mules, plowing and hoeing "badly," damaging tools, killing young plants, and picking "trashy cotton." James H. Hammond noted in his diary: "I find [hundreds] chopping up cotton dreadfully and begin to think that my stand has every year been ruined in this way." A Louisiana sugar planter advised his son to turn to cotton production, because it was "trouble enough to have to manage negroes in the simplest way, without having to overlook them in the manufacture of sugar and management of Machinery."<sup>28</sup> "Rascality" was also a major problem for those who employed slaves in factories.

Olmsted found slaveholders fretting about this problem everywhere in the South. In Texas an angry mistress complained that her domestics constantly tracked mud through the house: "What do they care? They'd just as lief clean the mud after themselves as [do] anything else—their time isn't any value to themselves." A Virginia planter said that he grew only the coarser and cheaper tobaccos, because the finer varieties "required more pains-taking and discretion than it was possible to make a large gang of negroes use." Another Virginian complained that slaves were "excessively careless and wasteful, and, in various ways . . . subject us to very annoying losses." Some masters used only crude, clumsy tools, because they were afraid to give their hands better ones.<sup>29</sup> One slaveholder felt aggrieved when he saw that the small patches which his Negroes cultivated for themselves were better cared for and more productive than his own fields.<sup>30</sup>

Masters were also troubled by the slave who idled in the quarters because of an alleged illness or disability. They often suspected that they were being victimized, for feigning illness was a favorite method of avoiding labor. Olmsted found one or more bondsmen "complaining" on almost every plantation he visited, and the proprietor frequently expressed "his suspicion that the invalid was really as well able to work as anyone else." Some masters and overseers believed that they could tell when a slave was deceiving them, but others were afraid to risk permanent injury to their human property. Ac-

<sup>22</sup> Olmsted, *Seaboard*, pp. 387–88; Abdy, *Journal*, II, p. 214; William Chambers, *Things as They Are in America* (London, 1854), pp. 269–70.

<sup>23</sup> [Ingraham], *South-West*, II, p. 286; Hammond *Diary*, entries for October 23, 24, 1834; Olmsted, *Seaboard*, pp. 434–36.

<sup>24</sup> Douglass, *My Bondage*, pp. 261–62; Catterall (ed.), *Judicial Cases*, II, pp. 73–74, 210–11.

<sup>25</sup> *De Bow's Review*, VII (1849), p. 220; XXVII (1854), p. 422; XXV (1858), p. 51.

<sup>26</sup> Joseph C. Robert, *The Story of Tobacco in America* (New York, 1949), p. 89.

<sup>27</sup> *De Bow's Review*, XI (1851), pp. 333–34.

<sup>28</sup> Hammond *Diary*, entry for June 7, 1839; Lewis Thompson to Thomas Thompson, December 31, 1858, Lewis Thompson Papers.

<sup>29</sup> Olmsted, *A Journey Through Texas* (New York, 1857), p. 120; *id.*, *Seaboard*, pp. 44–45, 91, 480–82.

<sup>30</sup> American Farmer, 4th Ser., I (1846), p. 295.

cording to one overseer, trying to detect those who were "shamming illness" was "the most disagreeable duty he had to perform. Negroes were famous for it."<sup>31</sup>

Slave women had great success with this stratagem. The overseer on Pierce Butler's Georgia plantation reported that they were constantly "shamming themselves into the family-way in order to obtain a diminution of their labor." One female enjoyed a "protracted pseudo-pregnancy" during which she "continued to reap increased rations as the reward of her expectation, till she finally had to disappoint and receive a flogging."<sup>32</sup> A Virginian asserted that a slave woman was a less profitable worker after reaching the "breeding age," because she so often pretended to be suffering from what were delicately called "female complaints." "You have to take her word for it . . . and you dare not set her to work; and so she will lay up till she feels like taking the air again, and plays the lady at your expense."<sup>33</sup>

Almost every slaveholder discovered at one time or another that a bondsmen had outwitted him by "playing possum" or by some ingenious subterfuge. One Negro spread powdered mustard on his tongue to give it a foul appearance before he was examined by a doctor. Another convinced his owner that he was totally disabled by rheumatism, until one day he was discovered vigorously rowing a boat. A master found two of his slaves "grunting" (a common term), one affecting a partial paralysis and the other declaring that he could not walk, but he soon learned that they "used their limbs very well when they chose to do so." For many years a slave on a Mississippi plantation escaped work by persuading his master that he was nearly blind. After the Civil War, however, he produced "no less than eighteen good crops for himself" and became one of "the best farmers in the country."<sup>34</sup>

In these and other ways a seemingly docile gang of slaves drove an inefficient manager well nigh to distraction. They probed for his weaknesses, matched their wits against his, and constantly contrived to disrupt the work routine. An efficient manager took cognizance of the fact that many of his bondsmen were "shrewd and cunning," ever ready to "disregard all reasonable restraints," and eager "to practice upon the old maxim, of 'give an inch and take an ell.'"<sup>35</sup> This was the reason why the owner of a small cotton plantation rejoiced when at last he could afford to employ an overseer: "I feel greatly relieved at the idea of getting a lazy trifling set of negroes off my hands. . . . They have wearied out all the patience I had with them."<sup>36</sup>

For the most part the slaves who thus provoked masters and overseers were the meek, smiling ones whom many thought were contented though

irresponsible. They were not reckless rebels who risked their lives for freedom; if the thought of rebellion crossed their minds, the odds against success seemed too overwhelming to attempt it. But the inevitability of their bondage made it none the more attractive. And so, when they could, they protested by shirking their duties, injuring the crops, feigning illness, and disrupting the routine. These acts were, in part, an unspectacular kind of "day to day resistance to slavery."<sup>37</sup>

According to Dr. Cartwright, there was a . . . disease peculiar to Negroes which he called *Diapetomania*: "the disease causing negroes to run away." Cartwright believed that it was a "disease of the mind" and that with "proper medical advice" it could be cured. The first symptom was a "sulky and dissatisfied" attitude. To forestall the full onset of the disease, the cause or discontent must be determined and removed. If there were no ascertainable cause, then "whipping the devil out of them" was the proper "preventive measure against absconding."<sup>38</sup>

Though Cartwright's dissertations on Negro diseases are mere curiosities of medical history, the problem he dealt with was a real and urgent one to nearly every slaveholder. Olmsted met a few planters, large or small, who were not more or less troubled by runaways. A Mississippian realized that his record was most unusual when he wrote in his diary: "Harry ran away; the first negro that ever ran from me." Another slaveholder betrayed his concern when he avowed that he would "rather a negro would do anything else than runaway."<sup>39</sup>

The number of runaways was not large enough to threaten the survival of the peculiar institution, because slaveholders took precautions to prevent the problem from growing to such proportions. But their measures were never entirely successful, as the advertisements for fugitives in southern newspapers made abundantly clear. Actually, the problem was much greater than these newspapers suggested, because many owners did not advertise for their absconding property. (When an owner did advertise, he usually waited until his slave had been missing for several weeks.) In any case, fugitive slaves were numbered in the thousands every year. It was an important form of protest against bondage.

Who were the runaways? They were generally young slaves, most of them under thirty, but occasionally masters searched for fugitives who were more than sixty years old. The majority of them were males, though female runaways were by no means uncommon. It is not true that most of them were mulattoes or of predominantly white ancestry. While this group was well represented among the fugitives, they were outnumbered by slaves who were described as "black" or of seemingly "pure" African ancestry. Domes-

<sup>31</sup> Olmsted, *Seaboard*, pp. 186-90; *id.*, *Back Country*, pp. 77-79.

<sup>32</sup> Frances Anne Kemble, *Journal of a Residence on a Georgian Plantation in 1838-1839* (New York, 1863), pp. 135-36, 235.

<sup>33</sup> Olmsted, *Seaboard*, pp. 188-90.

<sup>34</sup> Buckingham, *Slave States*, I, pp. 135, 402; Clement Claiborne Clay to Clement Comer

Clay, April 19, 1846, Clement C. Clay Papers; Smedes, *Memorials*, p. 80.

<sup>35</sup> Southern Cultivator, VII (1849), p. 140; XII (1854), p. 206.

<sup>36</sup> John W. Brown Diary, entry for January 24, 1854.

<sup>37</sup> Raymond A. and Alice H. Bauer, "Day to Day Resistance to Slavery," *Journal of Negro History*, XXVII (1942), pp. 388-419.

<sup>38</sup> De Bow's Review, XII (1851), pp. 331-33.

<sup>39</sup> Olmsted, *Back Country*, p. 476; Newcastle Plantation Diary, entry for June 7, 1860; Davis (ed.), *Diary of Bennett H. Barrow*, p. 165.

ties and skilled artisans—the ones who supposedly had the most intimate ties with the master class—as well as common field-hands. . . .

"His look is impudent and insolent, and he holds himself straight and walks well." So a Louisiana master described James, a runaway slave.<sup>40</sup> There were always bondsmen like James. In 1669, a Virginia statute referred to "the obstinacy of many of them"; in 1802, a South Carolina judge declared that they were "in general a headstrong, stubborn race of people"; and in 1859, a committee of a South Carolina agricultural society complained of the "insolence of disposition to which, as a race, they were remarkably liable." An overseer on a Louisiana plantation wrote nervously about the many "outrageous acts" recently committed by slaves in his locality and insisted that he scarcely had time to eat and sleep: "The truth is no man can begin to attend to such a business with any set of negroes, without the strictest vigilance on his part."<sup>41</sup> It was the minority of slaves whom his discipline could not humble (the "insolent," "surlly," and "unruly" ones) that worried this overseer—and slaveholders generally. These were the slaves whose discontent drove them to drastic measures.

Legally the offenses of the rebels ranged from petty misdemeanors to capital crimes, and they were punished accordingly. The master class looked upon any offense as more reprehensible (and therefore subject to more severe penalties) when committed by a slave than when committed by a free white. But how can one determine the proper ethical standards for identifying undesirable or even criminal behavior among slaves? How distinguish a "good" from a "bad" slave? Was the "good" slave the one who was courteous and loyal to his master, and who did his work faithfully and cheerfully? Was the "bad" slave the one who would not submit to his master, and who defiantly fought back? What were the limits, if any, to which a man deprived of his freedom could properly go in resisting bondage? How accountable was a slave to a legal code which gave him more penalties than protection and was itself a bulwark of slavery? This much at least can be said: many slaves rejected the answers which their masters gave to questions such as these. The slaves did not thereby repudiate law and morality; rather, they formulated legal and moral codes of their own.

The white man's laws against theft, for example, were not supported by the slave's code. In demonstrating the "absence of moral principle" among bondsmen, one master observed: "To steal and not to be detected is a merit among them." Let a master turn his back, wrote another, and some "cunning fellow" would appropriate part of his goods. No slave would betray another, for an informer was held "in greater detestation than the most notorious thief."<sup>42</sup>

If slaveholders are to be believed, petty theft was an almost universal "vice"; slaves would take anything that was not under lock and key. Field-hands killed hogs and robbed the corn crib. House servants helped themselves to wines, whiskey, jewelry, trinkets, and whatever else was lying about. Fugitives sometimes gained from their master unwilling help in financing the journey to freedom, the advertisements often indicating that they absconded with money, clothing, and a horse or mule. Thefts were not necessarily confined to the master's goods: any white man might be considered fair game.

Some bondsmen engaged in theft on more than a casual and petty basis. They made a business of it and thus sought to obtain comforts and luxuries which were usually denied them. A South Carolina master learned his house servants had been regularly looting his wine cellar and that one of them was involved in an elaborate "system of roguery." A planter in North Carolina found that three of his slaves had "for some months been carrying on a robbery" of meat and lard, the leader being "a young carpenter, remarkable for smartness . . . and no less worthy for his lamentable deficiency in common honesty."<sup>43</sup>

If the stolen goods were not consumed directly, they were traded to whites or to free Negroes. This illegal trade caused masters endless trouble, for slaves were always willing to exchange plantation products for tobacco, liquor, or small sums of money. Southern courts were kept busy handling the resulting prosecutions. One slaveholder discovered that his bondsmen had long been engaged in an extensive trade in corn. "Strict vigilance," he concluded, was necessary "to prevent them from theft; particularly when dishonesty is inherent, as is probably the case with some of them."<sup>44</sup> Dishonesty, as the master understood the term, indeed seemed to be a common if not an inherent trait of southern slaves.

The slaves, however, had a somewhat different definition of dishonesty in their own code, to which they were reasonably faithful. For appropriating their master's goods they might be punished and denounced by him, but they were not likely to be disgraced among their associates in the slave quarters, who made a distinction between "stealing" and "taking." Appropriating things from the master meant simply taking part of his property for the benefit of another part or, as Frederick Douglass phrased it, "taking his meat out of one tub, and putting it in another." Thus a female domestic who had been scolded for the theft of some trinkets was reported to have replied: "Law, mam, don't say I's wicked; ole Aunt Ann says its allers right for us poor colored people to 'popiate whatever of de wite folk's blessings de Lord puts in our way.'" Stealing, on the other hand, meant appropriating something

<sup>40</sup> New Orleans Picayune, November 4, 1851.

<sup>41</sup> Hurd, *Law of Freedom and Bondage*, I, p. 232; Catterall (ed.), *Judicial Cases*, II, pp. 281-82; *De Bow's Review*, XXVI (1859), p. 107; Moore Rawls to Lewis Thompson, May 9, 1858, Lewis Thompson Papers.

<sup>42</sup> Harrison, *Gospel Among the Slaves*, p. 103; *Farmers' Register*, V (1837), p. 302.

<sup>43</sup> Hammond Diary, entry for October 16, 1835; William S. Pettigrew to (James C. Johnston), October 3, 1850, Pettigrew Family Papers.

<sup>44</sup> William S. Pettigrew to J. Johnston Pettigrew, March 9, 1840, Pettigrew Family Papers; Catterall (ed.), *Judicial Cases*, *passim*.



that belonged to another slave, and this was an offense which slaves did not condone.<sup>45</sup>

The prevalence of theft was a clear sign that slaves were discontented, at least with the standard of living imposed upon them. They stole food to increase or enrich their diets or to trade for other coveted commodities. Quite obviously they learned from their masters the pleasures that could be derived from the possession of worldly goods; and when the opportunity presented itself, they "took" what was denied them as slaves.

Next to theft, arson was the most common slave "crime," one which slaveholders dreaded almost constantly. Fire was a favorite means for aggrieved slaves to even the score with their master. Reports emanated periodically from some region or other that there was an "epidemic" of gin-house burnings, or that some bondswoman had taken his revenge by burning the slave quarters or other farm buildings. More than one planter thus saw the better part of a year's harvest go up in flames.<sup>46</sup> Southern newspapers and court records are filled with illustrations of this offense, and with evidence of the severe penalties inflicted upon those found guilty of committing it.

Another "crime" was what might be called self-sabotage, a slave deliberately unfitting himself to labor for his master. An Arkansas slave, "at any time to save an hour's work," could "throw his left shoulder out of place." A Kentucky slave made himself unserviceable by downing medicines from his master's dispensary (thus showing a better understanding of the value of these nostrums than his owner). A slave woman was treated as an invalid because of "swillings in her arms"—until it was discovered that she produced this condition by thrusting her arms periodically into a beehive. Yellow Jacob, according to his master's plantation journal, "had a kick from a mule and when nearly well would bruise it and by that means kept from work."<sup>47</sup> Another Negro, after being punished by his owner, retaliated by cutting off his right hand; still another cut off the fingers of one hand to avoid being sold to the Deep South.<sup>48</sup>

A few desperate slaves carried this form of resistance to the extreme of self-destruction. Those freshly imported from Africa and those sold away from friends and relatives were especially prone to suicide.<sup>49</sup> London, a slave on a Georgia rice plantation, ran to the river and drowned himself after be-

<sup>45</sup> Douglass, *My Bondage*, pp. 189-91; Austin Steward, *Twenty-Two Years a Slave (Canandagua, N.Y., 1856)*, p. 29; Olmsted, *Seaboard*, pp. 116-17; Sellers, *Slavery in Alabama*, p. 257.

<sup>46</sup> Davis (ed.), *Diary of Bennet H. Barrow*, p. 131 n.; Rachel O'Connor to David Weeks, June 16, 1833, Weeks Collection; S. Forcher Gaillard Ms. *Plantation Journal*, entry for May 9, 1856.

<sup>47</sup> Helena (Ark.), *Southern Shield*, July 23, 1853; Buckingham, *Slave States*, I, p. 402; Gaillard *Plantation Journal*, entry for May 9, 1856.

<sup>48</sup> Harriet Martineau, *Society in America* (New York, 1837), II, p. 113; Drew, *The Refugee*, p. 178.

<sup>49</sup> Phillips (ed.), *Plantation and Frontier*, II, p. 31; Gaterall (ed.), *Judicial Cases*, II, pp. 425-26; III, pp. 216-17; Drew, *The Refugee*, p. 178.

ing threatened with a whipping. His overseer gave orders to leave the corpse untouched "to let the [other] negroes see [that] when a negro takes his own life they will be treated in this manner." A Texas planter bewailed the loss of a slave woman who hanged herself after two unsuccessful breaks for freedom: "I had been offered \$900.00 for her not two months ago, but damn her . . . I would not have had it happened for twice her value. The fates pursue me."<sup>50</sup>

Some runaways seemed determined to make their recapture as costly as possible and even resisted at the risk of their own lives. One advertisement, typical of many, warned that an escaped slave was a "resolute fellow" who would probably not be taken without a "show of competent force." When, after a day-long chase, three South Carolina fugitives were cornered, they "fought desperately," inflicted numerous wounds upon their pursuers with a barrage of rocks, and "refused to surrender until a force of about forty-five or fifty men arrived."<sup>51</sup> In southern court records there are numerous cases of runaway slaves who killed whites or were themselves killed in their frantic efforts to gain freedom.

In one dramatic case, a Louisiana fugitive was detected working as a free Negro on a Mississippi River flatboat. His pursuers, trailing him with a pack of "Negro dogs," finally found him "standing at bay upon the outer edge of a large raft of drift wood, armed with a club and pistol." He threatened to kill anyone who got near him. "Finding him obstinately determined not to surrender, one of his pursuers shot him. He fell at the third fire, and so determined was he not to be captured, that when an effort was made to rescue him from drowning he made battle with his club, and sunk waving his weapon in angry defiance."<sup>52</sup>

An effort to break up an organized gang of runaways was a dangerous business, because they were often unwilling to surrender without a fight. The fugitives in one well-armed band in Alabama were building a fort at the time they were discovered. Their camp was destroyed after a "smart skirmish" during which three of them were killed.<sup>53</sup> Such encounters did not always end in defeat for the slaves; some runaway bands successfully resisted all attempts at capture and remained at large for years.

Ante-bellum records are replete with acts of violence committed by individual slaves upon masters, overseers, and other whites. A Texan complained, in 1853, that cases of slaves murdering white men were becoming "painfully frequent." "Within the last year or two many murders have taken place, by negroes upon their owners," reported a Louisiana newspaper. And

<sup>50</sup> Phillips (ed.), *Plantation and Frontier*, II, p. 94; John R. Lyons to William W. Renwick, April 4, 1854, William W. Renwick Papers.

<sup>51</sup> Petition of William Boyd to South Carolina legislature, November 29, 1858, in South Carolina Slavery Manuscripts Collection.

<sup>52</sup> Fehciana Whig, quoted in Olmsted, *Back Country*, p. 474.

<sup>53</sup> Phillips (ed.), *Plantation and Frontier*, II, pp. 90-91; Bassett, *Plantation Overseer*, pp. 78-79.

a Florida editor once wrote: "It is our painful duty to record another instance of the destruction of the life of a white man by a slave."<sup>54</sup>

Many masters owned one or more bondsmen whom they feared as potential murders. A Georgia planter remembered Jack, his plantation carpenter, "the most notoriously bad character and worst Negro of the place." Jack "was the only Negro ever in our possession who I considered capable of murdering me, or burning my dwelling at night, or capable of committing any act."<sup>55</sup>

Slaves like Jack could be watched closely, but others appeared to be submissive until suddenly they turned on their masters. Even trusted house servants might give violent expression to long pent up feelings. One "first rate" female domestic, while being punished, abruptly attacked her mistress, "threw her down, and beat her unmercifully on the head and face." A "favorite body servant" of a "humane master who rarely or never punished his slaves" one day became insolent. Unwilling to be disciplined, this slave waylaid his owner, "knocked him down with a whiteoak club, and beat his head to a pulp."<sup>56</sup> Here was another reason why it seemed foolish for a master to put his "confidence in a Negro."

At times these acts of violence appeared to be for "no cause"—that is, they resulted from a slave's "bad disposition" rather than from a particular grievance. But more often they resulted from a clash of personalities, or from some specific incident. For example, a slave who had been promised freedom in his master's will, poisoned his master to hasten the day of liberation. A South Carolina bondsman was killed during a fight with an overseer who had whipped his son. In North Carolina a slave intervened while the overseer was whipping his wife, and in the ensuing battle the overseer met his death.<sup>57</sup>

The most common provocation to violence was the attempt of a master or overseer either to work or to punish slaves severely. An Alabama bondsman confessed killing the overseer because "he was a hard down man on him, and said he was going to be harder." Six Louisiana slaves together killed an overseer and explained in their confession that they found it impossible to satisfy him. Three North Carolina slaves killed their master when they decided that "the old man was too hard on them, and they must get rid of him."<sup>58</sup> During one of these crises an overseer called upon his hands to help him punish an "unmanageable" slave: "not one of them paid the least attention to me but kept on at their work." These encounters did not always

<sup>54</sup> Austin Texas State Gazette, September 3, 1853; Alexandria (La.), Red River Republican, April 24, 1852, Pensacola Gazette, May 4, 1839.

<sup>55</sup> Mangault Plantation Records, entry for March 22, 1867.

<sup>56</sup> Rachel O'Connor to A. T. Conrad, May 26, 1836, Weeks Collection; Austin Texas State Gazette, September 23, 1854.

<sup>57</sup> Martineau, *Society in America*, II, pp. 110-11; Catterall (ed.), *Judicial Cases*, II, pp. 206-207, 434-35.

<sup>58</sup> Catterall (ed.), *Judicial Cases*, III, pp. 238-41; Reuben Cannal to Lewis Thompson, June 17, 1855, Lewis Thompson Papers; Hardy Hardison to William S. Pettigrew, February 11, 1858, Pettigrew Family Papers.

lead to death, but few plantations escaped without at least one that might easily have ended in tragedy. "Things move on here in the old style except that now and then a refractory negro has to be taken care of," was the offhand comment of a planter.<sup>59</sup>

Sometimes a slave who showed sufficient determination to resist punishment managed to get the best of his owner or overseer. A proud bondsman might vow that, regardless of the consequences, he would permit no one to whip him.<sup>60</sup> An overseer thought twice before precipitating a major crisis with a strong-willed slave, he might even overlook minor infractions of discipline.

But an impasse such as this was decidedly unusual; if it had not been, slavery itself would have stood in jeopardy. Ordinarily these clashes between master and slave were fought out to a final settlement, and thus a thread of violence was woven into the pattern of southern bondage. Violence, indeed, was the method of resistance adopted by the boldest and most discontented slaves. Its usual reward, however, was not liberty but death!

No ante-bellum Southerner could ever forget Nat Turner. The career of this man made an impact upon the people of this section as great as that of John C. Calhoun or Jefferson Davis. Yet Turner was only a slave in Southampton County, Virginia—and during most of his life a rather unimpressive one at that. He was a pious man, a Baptist exhorter by avocation, apparently as humble and docile as a slave was expected to be. There is no evidence that he was undeterred, overworked, or treated with special cruelty. If Nat Turner could not be trusted, what slave could? That was what made his sudden deed so frightening.

Somehow Turner came to believe that he had been divinely chosen to deliver his people from bondage, and he persuaded several other slaves to assist him. In due time he saw the sign for which he had waited, and early in the morning of August 22, 1831, he and his followers rose in rebellion. They began by killing the family to whom Turner belonged. As they marched through the Southampton countryside they gained additional recruits, making a total of about seventy. (Others seemed ready to join if the rebels came their way. The slave Jacob, for example, proclaimed "that if they came by he would join them and assist in killing all the white people.") Within two days they killed nearly sixty whites. They could have killed more. They left undisturbed at least one poor white family, "because they thought no better of themselves than they did of the negroes." To justify the killings, members of Turner's band declared that they had had enough of punishment, or that they now intended to be as rich as their masters. One rebel demonstrated his new status by walking off in his late owner's shoes and socks.

The Nat Turner rebellion lasted only forty-eight hours. Swiftly mobilizing in overwhelming strength, the whites easily dispersed the rebels. Then

<sup>59</sup> Taylor, "Negro Slavery in Louisiana," pp. 258-59, Charles L. Pettigrew to William S. Pettigrew, October 9, 1837, Pettigrew Family Papers.

<sup>60</sup> Douglass, *My Bondage*, pp. 95, 242-46; Brown, *Narrative*, pp. 17-18.



followed a massacre during which not only the insurrectionists but scores of innocent bondsmen were slaughtered. Others, charged with "feloniously consulting, advising and conspiring . . . to rebel . . . and making insurrection and taking the lives of divers free white persons of this Commonwealth," were tried before a court of oyer and terminer during the months of September and October. Some were executed, others transported. Most of those transported had not actively participated in the rebellion; they had merely expressed sympathy for the rebels.

Nat Turner himself was not captured until October 30, more than two months after the uprising. He was brought to trial on November 5, convicted the same day, and hanged six days later.<sup>61</sup> Thus ended an event which produced in the South something resembling a mass trauma, from which the whites had not recovered three decades later. The danger that other Nat Turners might emerge, that an even more serious insurrection might some day occur, became an enduring concern as long as the peculiar institution survived. Proslavery writers boldly asserted that Southerners did not fear their slaves, that a rebellion of the laboring class was more likely to transpire in the North than in the South; but the fear of rebellion, sometimes vague, sometimes acute, was with them always.

Though it was the most disastrous (for both slaves and masters), Nat Turner's was not the first insurrection. Several earlier conspiracies, which narrowly missed being carried into execution might easily have precipitated rebellions much more extensive than that of Turner.<sup>62</sup> These uprisings and conspiracies began as early as the seventeenth century and kept Southerners apprehensive throughout the colonial period. The preamble to the South Carolina statute of 1740 defining the duties of slave patrols stated that many "horrible and barbarous massacres" had been committed or plotted by the slaves who were "generally prone to such cruel practices."<sup>63</sup> On the eve of the American Revolution a Charlestonian wrote about a "disturbance" among the bondsmen who had "mimicked their betters in crying *Liberty*." In 1785, a West Florida slaveholder was dismayed to learn that several of his slaves were involved in an insurrection plot: "Of what avail is kindness and good usage when rewarded by such ingratitude . . . [?]"<sup>64</sup> Such incidents set the pattern for the nineteenth century.

<sup>61</sup> Details of the Turner insurrection can be found in contemporary Richmond newspapers, and in the manuscript records of the trials in Southampton County Minute Book, 1830-1835. See also William S. Drewry, *The Southampton Insurrection* (Washington, D.C., 1900); Thomas R. Gray, *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (Baltimore, 1831).

<sup>62</sup> Herbert Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts* (New York, 1943) presents evidence of many conspiracies and a few rebellions, each involving ten or more slaves, from the colonial period to the end of the Civil War. See also Joseph C. Carroll, *Slave Insurrections in the United States, 1800-1865* (Boston, 1938); Harvey Wish, "American Slave Insurrections before 1861," *Journal of Negro History*, XXII (1937), pp. 299-320.

<sup>63</sup> Hurd, *Law of Freedom and Bondage*, I, p. 308.

<sup>64</sup> Henry Laurens to J. Gervais, January 29, 1766, Henry Laurens Ms. Letter Book, 1766-1766, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia (copy in possession of Professor Carl Bridenbaugh); Sellers, *Slavery in Alabama*, pp. 13-14.

The new century opened with the Gabriel Conspiracy (August, 1800) in Henrico County, Virginia, in which at least a thousand slaves were implicated. The warnings of two bondsmen and a severe storm enabled the whites to forestall a projected march upon Richmond. A decade later some five hundred slaves in St. John the Baptist Parish, Louisiana, armed with cane knives and other crude weapons, advanced toward New Orleans. But the planters and a strong detachment of troops put them to flight. In 1822, Denmark Vesey, a free Negro in Charleston, planned a vast conspiracy which came to nothing after it was given away by a slave. These and other plots were invariably followed by severe reprisals, including the indiscriminate killing of slaves as well as mass executions after regular trials. The heads of sixteen Louisiana rebels were stuck upon poles along the Mississippi River as a grim warning to other slaves. After the Vesey conspiracy, Charlestonians expressed disillusionment with the idea that by generous treatment the slaves "would become more satisfied with their condition and more attached to the whites."<sup>65</sup>

The shock of Nat Turner caused Southerners to take preventive measures, but these never eliminated their apprehension or the actual danger. Hardly a year passed without some kind of alarming disturbance somewhere in the South. When no real conspiracy existed, wild rumors often agitated the whites and at times came close to creating an insurrection panic. The rumors might be entirely unfounded, or they might grow out of some local incident which was magnified by exaggeration. Even the historian cannot always distinguish between the rumors and the facts. Most of the stories seem to have had a foundation in at least a minor disturbance, limited perhaps to a single plantation where the slaves suddenly became insubordinate, or to a whole neighborhood where they showed signs of becoming restive. Whether caused by rumor or fact, the specter of rebellion often troubled the sleep of the master class.

The Turner rebellion itself produced an insurrection panic that swept the entire South. A Richmond editor wondered whether the southern press was trying to give the slaves "false conceptions of their numbers and capacity, by exhibiting the terror and confusion of the whites, and to induce them to think that practicable, which they see is so much feared by their superiors."<sup>66</sup> In eastern North Carolina the panic caused the arrest of scores of slaves and the execution of more than a dozen. A South Carolinian reported that there was "considerable alarm" in his state too and that some slaves were hanged to prevent a rumored uprising.<sup>67</sup> The excitement spread into the Southwest where it was feared that the bondsmen would become "troublesome." A Mississippian, confessing "great apprehension," noted that

<sup>65</sup> Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts*, pp. 209-92; Taylor, "Negro Slavery in Louisiana," pp. 268-74; Phillips, *Plantation and Frontier*, II, pp. 103-104.

<sup>66</sup> Richmond *Whig*, quoted in Alexandria (Va.) *Phenix Gazette*, September 6, 1831.

<sup>67</sup> Johnson, *Acute-Bellum North Carolina*, pp. 519-20; Rosannah P. Rogers to David S. Rogers, October 29, 1831, Renwick Papers.

"within 4 hours march of Natchez" there were "2200 able bodied male slaves." He warned: "It behooves [us] to be vigilant—but silent."<sup>68</sup>

Similar insurrection panics developed from time to time thereafter. In 1835, one of these frightful disturbances centered in Mississippi and Louisiana; before it subsided, numerous bondsmen had been legally or extralegally executed. This panic even spread into Roane County in East Tennessee, though that county contained a very small slave population. There was "a great deal of talk and some dread of the negroes rising at Christmas or new year," reported a local slaveholder. "I can not say that I have had much fear of their rising here, but have thought it right to be careful and watchful. It is a disagreeable state of living to be ever suspicious of those with whom we live."<sup>69</sup> This point was illustrated by a not uncommon incident in a small village on the Eastern Shore of Virginia. One night in 1849, the firing of guns "alarmed the people very much. They at once thought that the Slaves had risen to murder the white people. Many immediately left their houses and fled to the woods. . . . But it was afterwards ascertained that it was a false alarm."<sup>70</sup> This was indeed a "disagreeable state of living!"

The most acute and widespread insurrection panics, after the Turner rebellion, occurred in 1856 and 1860, each of them resulting in part from the rise of the Republican party and the exciting political campaigns. On both occasions alarming stories of huge conspiracies spread through every slave state, stories frequently mentioning "unscrupulous" white men (presumably abolitionist emissaries like John Brown) who were "tampering" with the Negroes and encouraging them to rebel. "All at once, in Kentucky, Tennessee, Missouri, Arkansas, Louisiana and Texas, it is discovered that the slaves are meditating schemes of insurrection," proclaimed a Richmond newspaper in a hysterical editorial. "From almost every point in the Southwest, rumors of insurrectionary movements among the negroes come upon us with more or less distinct and authentic detail." In Virginia, as a slaveholder noted, "reports of negro plots" had "induced proper measures of vigilance."<sup>71</sup> A South Carolinian observed privately that there was "a good deal of anxiety," but little was being said about it, "as every one felt it should not be the subject of general talk." In Texas, one of the principal centers of these insurrection panics, vigilance committees were hastily formed to deal with the expected emergency.<sup>72</sup> On these occasions, as on others, there was some substance to the rumors, however much they were exaggerated. In 1856 slave unrest did

increase noticeably in certain areas, including Texas, where there was at least one well authenticated conspiracy.<sup>73</sup>

Sometimes rebellions took odd forms. The Seminole War in Florida was in part a slave revolt, for many fugitive Negroes fought alongside the Indian warriors. In 1841, a group of slaves being carried from Virginia to New Orleans on the brig *Creole* rose in rebellion, seized the ship, and sailed it to the Bermudas. In 1848, about seventy-five slaves from Fayette County, Kentucky, led by a white man, made a break for the Ohio River. They waged a brisk battle with their pursuers before they were forced to surrender. More than forty of them were tried for "most wickedly, seditiously, and rebelliously" making a "public insurrection." Three of the slaves were executed, and their white leader was sentenced to twenty years in prison.<sup>74</sup>

One of the last ante-bellum slave conspiracies occurred in October, 1860, in the neighborhood of Plymouth, in eastern North Carolina. It began when a score of slaves met in a swamp to plan an insurrection. Their plan was to persuade several hundred bondsmen to join them in a march on Plymouth; they would kill all the whites they met on the road, burn the town, take money and weapons, and escape by ship through Albemarle Sound. The plot was betrayed by a slave, and once again panic spread throughout the neighborhood. "When I reached Plymouth," wrote a local planter, "the town was in the greatest of commotion, and, as even calm persons thought, with some reason." The country people were "so much excited and alarmed as to vow themselves as ready to slaughter the negroes indiscriminately." This planter believed that during an insurrection panic "the negroes are in much more danger from the non slave holding whites than the whites are from the negroes."<sup>75</sup> He was probably right, though the slaveholders were hardly less inclined, on that account, to be ruthless whenever rumors of rebellion swept through the land.

That there was no slave conspiracy comparable to Denmark Vesey's and no rebellion comparable to Nat Turner's, during the three decades before the Civil War, has been explained in many ways. The explanations, however, do not sufficiently emphasize the impact which the Turner rebellion had on the slaves themselves. The speed with which it was crushed and the massacre that followed were facts soon known, doubtless, to every slave in Virginia and, before long, to almost every slave in the South. Among the Negroes everywhere, news generally spread so far and so fast as to amaze the whites. The Turner story was not likely to encourage slaves to make new attempts to win their freedom by fighting for it. They now realized that they would face a united white community, well armed and quite willing to annihilate as much of the black population as might seem necessary.

<sup>73</sup> Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts*, pp. 325-56; Wendell G. Addington, "Slave Insurrections in Texas," *Journal of Negro History*, XXXV (1950), pp. 408-35.

<sup>74</sup> Porter, "Florida Slaves and Free Negroes in the Seminole War, 1835-1842," *loc. cit.*, pp. 420-21; Catterall (ed.), *Judicial Cases*, III, pp. 565-67; Coleman, *Slavery Times in Kentucky*, pp. 88-92.

<sup>75</sup> William S. Pettigrew to James C. Johnston, October 25, 1860, Pettigrew Family Papers.

<sup>68</sup> *Newitt Plantation Journal*, entry for October 28, 1831; Stephen Duncan to Thomas Butler, October 4, 1831, Butler Family Papers.

<sup>69</sup> William D. Lenoir to Thomas Lenoir, December 27, 1835, Lenoir Family Papers.

<sup>70</sup> J. Milton Emerson Ms. Journal, entry for September 29, 1849.

<sup>71</sup> Richmond *Enquirer*, December 16, 1856; Edmund Ruffin Ms. Diary, entry for December 25, 1856.

<sup>72</sup> Easterby (ed.), *South Carolina Rice Plantation*, p. 136; Austin Texas State Gazette, November 15, 22, 29, 1856; Harvey Wish, "The Slave Insurrection Panic of 1856," *Journal of Southern History*, V (1939), pp. 206-22.

In truth, no slave uprising ever had a chance of ultimate success, even though it might have cost the master class heavy casualties. The great majority of the disarmed and outnumbered slaves, knowing the futility of rebellion, refused to join in any of the numerous plots. Most slaves had to express their desire for freedom in less dramatic ways. They rarely went beyond disorganized individual action—which, to be sure, caused their masters no little annoyance. The bondsmen themselves lacked the power to destroy the web of bondage. They would have to have the aid of free men inside or outside the South.

The survival of slavery, then, cannot be explained as due to the contentment of slaves or their failure to comprehend the advantages of freedom. They longed for liberty and resisted bondage as much as any people could have done in their circumstances, but their longing and their resistance were not enough even to render the institution unprofitable to most masters. The masters had power and, as will be seen, they developed an elaborate technique of slave control. Their very preoccupation with this technique was, in itself, a striking refutation of the myth that slavery survived because of the cheerful acquiescence of the slaves.